

Kbal Romeas, Lower Sesan II Dam Profile



The indigenous Pu Nong inhabitants of Kbal Romeas village in Stung Treng Province's Sesan District say that their land, livelihoods and entire way of life are under threat from the construction of a large hydropower dam.

Kbal Romeas lies on a bend of the Srepok River, which after beginning its journey in the central highlands of Vietnam, snakes through Ratanakiri and Stung Treng provinces in Cambodia, where it joins the Sesan and Sekong rivers before they all feed into the Mekong further downstream. This so called 3S river system forms part of the Lower Mekong Dry Forest Eco-Region, an area of rich biodiversity home to a wide range of rare and endangered species.

The village is one of several that are due to be inundated by a reservoir formed by the Lower Sesan II Dam, currently under construction by the Chinese-Cambodian Hydro Power Lower Sesan 2 Company (HPLS2) on the Sesan River, approximately 1.5km from its confluence with the Srepok and 25km from where both rivers join the Mekong.¹ After a series of feasibility studies conducted since 1999, the Council of Ministers finally approved the project in November 2012. Construction began in February 2014 and by some estimates is due to be operational by 2017, supplying electricity to Kampong Cham and Kratie provinces.²

According to an Environmental Impact Assessment ("EIA") completed in October 2008 as part of a larger feasibility study, the construction of the dam will destroy 30,000 hectares of forest adjoining the Srepok and Sesan rivers, thereby having a significant impact on wildlife habitat, as well as 24% of the total agricultural land in Sesan District. The project will also have a severe impact on migratory fish stocks, creating a flooded area of 335km² and requiring the involuntary resettlement of 1579 households to six resettlement areas, some of which are in approved forest/land concession areas "likely be subject to considerable disturbance now and in the future."³

Beyond the physical relocation of communities living in the reservoir area, the dam will have a huge impact on the livelihoods and cultural life of many thousands more. Indigenous Pu Nong residents of Kbal Romeas village told CCHR that aside from fishing in the river, the surrounding forests are an important source of income for local families, where they hunt wild animals and gather fruit, honey, flowers, fungus and other valuable natural products such as resin, used to make pitch and other useful commodities. Forest near Kbal Romeas is

¹ 3S Rivers Protection Network, 'Fact Sheet of the Lower Sesan II Hydropower Dam Project, Northeastern Cambodia,' September 2014, available at: http://www.3spn.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/LS2_FactSheet-ENG_FINAL_September_2014_bth_td.pdf

² Chan Muyhong, 'Transmission line to connect dam by 2017,' Phnom Penh Post, 21 May 2015, available at: <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/transmission-line-connect-dam-2017>

³ See Executive summary, Environmental Impact Assessment, Feasibility Study of Lower Sesan II Hydropower Project, Stung Treng Province, Cambodia, prepared by Power Engineering Joint Stock Company 1 - Vietnam, October 2008. On file with CCHR.

already being cleared to make way for the reservoir that will later flood the village, making it increasingly difficult for local residents to sustain their traditional means of income.

Like many indigenous people in Cambodia, for the Pu Nong, land and forests also carry major spiritual significance as a link to their ancestors and natural spirits, relationships with which form a key part of the community's cultural identity and sense of wellbeing. The local forests contain important sites where local people pray to these spirits, invoking their help in maintaining the spiritual and physical health of the community. The loss of land and forests therefore has a severe impact on local people's ability to practice their traditional culture and spiritual beliefs.

Local and international civil society organizations have argued that the initial EIA did not provide local communities with adequate information, and that in fact the impacts of the dam are likely to be even more severe than originally acknowledged, and have called for a new EIA to be carried out in light of unconfirmed reports that the dam has been significantly re-designed to mitigate some of the worst effects.⁴ Some local communities have rejected relocation plans and called for the project to be cancelled.⁵

In 2014, HPLS2 promised to relocate villagers, offering each family a plot of land measuring 80m squared, 5 hectares of farmland, money \$6,000 and continue to provide food for one year. They also promised to build a school, hospital, pagoda and market. This promise led to a three-way split among the villagers in Kbal Romeas. One group unconditionally accepted the company's offer; the second group stated they would only accept if there was another EIA carried out and would only give up their land after the company provided the promised compensation; and the third group rejected the offer outright, no matter what compensation is offered. In November 2014 and again in January 2015, the local Commune Chief and Deputy Provincial Governor came to the village and asked the residents to measure their houses, as part of efforts to negotiate compensation in the form of alternative housing in resettlement sites being offered to those being forced to relocate.

When villagers have tried to convene meetings in the village to discuss the relocation and compensation issue, they have met with obstruction from the local authorities. On 18th March 2015, police officers attempted to stop a meeting involving 80 villagers from six villages on 'river resource governance,' saying that the villagers should have informed the Commune Chief and District Governor in advance. Ultimately, the authorities allowed the meeting to continue, but due to the presence of the police, some villagers left the meeting.

Locals from other villages affected by the Lower Sesan II project, who already accepted relocation settlements, wrote to HPLS2 on 27 July 2015 requesting a delay in the relocation program due to problems with their resettlement site. . A representative of the Ministry of Mines and Energy promised to provide 20kg of rice per person annually for the resettled villagers⁶ – a worrying indication of the agricultural sustainability of the resettlement land.

⁴ 'Public Statement, 'Lower Sesan 2 Dam: Call for release of information on project redesign and a new Environmental Impact Assessment,' October 16 2014, available at: https://d2zyt4oqqla0dw.cloudfront.net/sites/default/files/documents/ls2final_statement_on_new_eia_eng.pdf

⁵ 3S Rivers Protection Network, 'Affected Communities Appeal to the National Assembly: "Lower Sesan2 Dam Damages Cambodia's Rich Natural Resources. Cancel the Project Immediately," available at: <http://www.3spn.org/for-immediate-release/>

⁶ May Titthara, 'Dammed if they don't', The Phnom Penh Post (28 July 2015)

Kbal Romeas community representative Dam Samnang said, "We want the government firstly to hold a detailed consultation with the affected people. Secondly, we want the EIA report to be broadly disseminated. We want the minimum possible effect on the indigenous people's forests, and we want to avoid all evictions. We are asking the government to suspend the project until a new EIA is complete, because the last one was not transparent for the people."